

MOE ANNUAL WORKPLAN SEMINAR

Education is not all about studying. From after-school counselling to sport and art programmes,

more schools are turning the focus on non-academic efforts to help students build character and perform better

He left gang, thanks to his teachers

BY LIN ZHAOWEI

HE MAY have been a troublemaker, but Vester Ng's teachers refused to give up on him.

They saw the potential in the teenage gang member, who was always getting into fights and misbehaving in class, and offered him one-on-one counselling and academic coaching.

The Northbrooks Secondary School student left the gang and turned his life around. Now 18, he is in his final year studying digital animation at the Institute of Technical Education (ITE).

Vester was just one of the youngsters with learning and behavioural difficulties who have been helped by his school's support scheme. The Special Pull-Out and Re-integration programme takes about 15 to 30 students a year out of normal classes for coaching and counselling.

Yesterday, Education Minister Heng Swee Keat praised the scheme. "We need to cater to the diverse needs of Singaporeans and allow all to progress in life - not by prescribing one path for all, but to have a diversity of pathways and opportunities, regardless of background," he said at the annual workplan seminar at the Ngee Ann Polytechnic Convention Centre. Similar programmes have been carried out successfully at other schools.

Most students on the scheme at Northbrooks end up going back to attend normal classes, said principal Janet Oh.

The programme started in 2007 and is run by teacher and

counsellor Nelleke Eng, 33. She said it is customised to suit each student's needs. For some, this could mean vocational training in subjects such as hairdressing.

Vester, who was the first student to be put on the scheme, said he realised that being in a gang was a waste of time after Ms Eng counselled him.

It also emerged during her personal coaching sessions that he had a mild form of dyslexia, a learning impairment which made it difficult for him to differentiate between the letters B and D.

"I thought I was stupid, and my parents thought I was just lazy," he recalled. But after his lessons with Ms Eng, his grades improved. He eventually scored a B4 for English at N level, which was beyond his expectations.

He is graduating from ITE this year, and will be applying to study theatre arts at the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts - a passion he discovered this year when he acted in a school musical production.

This year, Northbrooks also started a programme to groom its top performers. Sixteen Secondary 3 youngsters were pulled out of maths and physics classes for separate sessions where they are given more challenging questions.

They also give back to the school by helping to coach juniors who are weak in maths and science. "Our aim is to help them score at least five distinctions," said Mrs Oh.

"But we also want to develop them holistically, by making them give back to the community."

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Northbrooks Secondary School's Special Pull-Out and Re-integration scheme, run by teacher Nelleke Eng, helped turn former student and gang member Vester Ng's life around. Now 18, he is in his final year studying digital animation at the Institute of Technical Education. ST PHOTO: DESMOND LIM

MOE to tweak system of assessing schools

BY LEOW SI WAN

MEMBERS of the public may have noticed that some schools put up banners on their grounds or on their websites about having won awards from the Ministry of Education (MOE).

What is less known, however, is the amount of administrative work by the school that goes into bagging these - time spent that could have been put into activities to directly benefit the students.

The MOE will tweak its system of assessing and recognising the efforts of schools, so they spend less time chasing these awards, Education Minister Heng Swee Keat said yesterday.

At the moment, for example, schools applying for awards have to assess themselves in a number of areas using the School Excellence Model (SEM). This comprehensive self-appraisal tool is deemed to have created too much paperwork, the minister said.

The MOE also has a Masterplan of Awards (MoA), a hierarchical structure of prizes honouring best practices among schools.

Mr Heng, speaking at the MOE's workplan seminar, said the review of the SEM aims to cut paperwork "by up to a third". Changes to be made to the MoA, introduced with the SEM in 1998, will be designed to help schools better meet the needs of their students.

The four levels of awards under the MoA now are Level One Awards, for schools with achievements in the space of a year; Level Two Awards, for schools with sustained excellence in specific areas; the School Distinction Award, the second-highest honour; and the School Excellence Award, the highest, for outstanding processes and outcomes.

The review will:

- Reposition the School Distinction and School Excellence awards;
- Scrap the Sustained Achievement Awards, a Level Two award, so schools have more time to pursue more all-rounded activities;
- Scrap the need for schools to apply for the awards on their own; and
- Encourage schools to focus on the right outcomes, and to recognise schools with good practices.

Mr Heng said that by making the awards system "flatter and less hierarchical", schools will have greater flexibility to innovate. He also urged schools to form collaborative partnerships to pursue excellence as a team.